

Japanese Premier Reels From Uproar Touched Off by U.S. Ties, Nuclear Arms

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TOKYO—Until just recently, Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki looked like he had the makings of a solid .300 hitter in the Japanese political game.

Today's he's in a deep batting slump, unable to hit the semantic curve balls thrown him by the press and his political opponents regarding defense relations with the U.S.

Mr. Suzuki, before his trip to Washington two weeks ago, seemed to have found a way to keep everybody happy, both those skittish about strengthening Japan militarily and those within his own Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP, who want Japan to rearm faster. Now he seems to have lost his touch.

Mr. Suzuki stumbled through much of last week repeatedly changing his position on whether the U.S.-Japan "alliance" announced in Washington is military in character. The week ended with his foreign minister resigning and with the press and political opposition questioning whether Mr. Suzuki has major league stuff.

This week the issue plaguing Mr. Suzuki is nuclear weapons on U.S. ships that call on Japanese ports or sail through Japanese waters. Armed with some new ammunition, the opposition is reviving charges that the prime minister and his predecessor LDP prime ministers over the past 21 years have been lying to the public in denying that such ships carried nuclear weapons.

Suzuki Changes Position

At a news conference Wednesday, Mr. Suzuki attempted to reiterate the government's traditional answer to such charges. But in the process he opened up a new issue and then reportedly changed his position on that issue later in the day.

Mr. Suzuki's supporters in the government are trying to play down the prime minister's difficulties. The new foreign minister, Sunao Sonoda, reportedly told U.S. Ambassador Mike Mansfield Wednesday that "it's clear sailing weather, although the waves are a little high." Mr. Sonoda said "there is nothing to worry about" in U.S.-Japan relations.

The furor in Japan over the latest issue has implications beyond those for Mr. Suzuki. It suggests the continuing sensitivity of post-Hiroshima Japan to nuclear weapons, a sensitivity that gives rise to a very broad interpretation of the oft-repeated Japanese vow not to allow the "introduction" of such weapons into Japan. But it suggests that Japanese advocates of beefing up Japan's defenses generally, who have made considerable headway in recent years, can still be put on the defensive by a string of events such as those of recent weeks, which have also included the sinking of a Japanese freighter by a U.S. Navy nuclear submarine and the damaging of Japanese fishermen's nets by U.S. Navy vessels.

Ever since the U.S. and Japan signed their 1960 security treaty, there have been assertions that U.S. ships docking in Japan carry nuclear weapons, and the most recent allegation was by a retired U.S. admiral to a congressional committee in 1974. What makes the latest testimony so potent is that it comes from Edwin Reischauer, a Harvard professor and former U.S. ambassador to Japan whom many Japanese hold in high regard.

Mr. Reischauer told the Mainichi Shimbun, a major Japanese newspaper, in an interview earlier this week that U.S. ships carrying nuclear weapons have routinely called on Japanese ports and that "it's about time for the Japanese public . . . and the government to simply recognize that fact."

"Verbal Agreement" on Ships

The 1960 treaty doesn't address the port-call issue specifically, but Mr. Reischauer suggested there was a "verbal agreement" permitting such calls. He said it was "quite unreasonable," if Japan is to be protected by the U.S. "nuclear umbrella," for Japan to require U.S. ships to unload nuclear weapons before calling on Japanese ports.

For years, however, LDP governments have insisted publicly that such port calls are covered by an exchange of notes accompanying the 1960 treaty and calling for "prior consultation" in the event of "major changes in the deployment into Japan of U.S. armed forces" and "major changes in their equipment." The government has said that since there haven't been any prior consultations, the government "trusts" that such port calls haven't been made.

The U.S., on the other hand, has always taken the position that it generally won't conform or deny the presence of nuclear weapons, but that it has abided by the 1960

treaty, without clarifying its understanding of precisely what the treaty permits and forbids.

At his news conference Wednesday, Mr. Suzuki reiterated the position that the government believes port calls of nuclear-armed ships are subject to "prior consultation" and he added that "there was no such (verbal) agreement as reported by the press." Given U.S. assurances that it is abiding by the treaty, Mr. Suzuki said "it is very difficult (for Japan) to realistically probe" assertions such as Mr. Reischauer's.

But Mr. Suzuki also went on to suggest—in vague language during the news conference, and more specifically to Japanese reporters later—that Japan might in some instances allow the port calls if it were consulted in advance.

By the end of the day, however, after consulting with advisers, Mr. Suzuki had met with Japanese reporters again and changed his position. According to Kyodo news service, he said, "Quite in simple terms, Japan's answer is 'no' to such transit visits by U.S. naval ships or planes carrying nuclear arms."